

# A Civilising Vision for Victoria

A statue of Charles Joseph La Trobe was unveiled in the forecourt of the State Library of Victoria on 21 November 2006 by the then Governor of Victoria Professor David de Kretser, belatedly recognising La Trobe's significant contribution to the state.

Charles Joseph La Trobe did more to shape the state of Victoria than any other man, yet his achievements have gone largely unrecognised.

He arrived in 1839, only four years after the first white settlement, when the population numbered fewer than 6,000. When he left in 1854, Victoria was the richest and most populous of the Australian colonies. The population was touching 300,000, self-government had been won, the goldfields were booming, the public library and art gallery were established and a university founded. The whole framework of modern Victoria had been set up.

La Trobe, the visionary administrator of Victoria, had much to do with the establishment of many of the cultural institutions we take for granted today. In 1853, along with Redmond Barry, La Trobe set out to establish a university and a public library in a colony not yet three years old.

On arrival in Melbourne, having been posted to the Port Phillip colony by the British Colonial Office, La Trobe had written to his friend, the publisher James Murray: *You, my dear Sir, have never been transported 16,000 miles from civilization, and cannot imagine what it is to be cast so far beyond the reach of the thousand daily means of improvement and enjoyment which they possess who breathe the air of Europe ... I have called our present position Exile, and so it is, to all intents and purposes ... Society here is, of course as you may suppose, in its infancy. The arts and sciences are unborn.*

He was, seemingly, in deep shock after his initial encounter with Melbourne and its inhabitants. It was all so alien to him after the cultural experiences of day-to-day life in Europe.

However, he perceived his mission at Port Phillip, based on his strongly held Moravian faith, in the light of almost a religious vocation. He saw this role as directing the settlers onto the road to salvation, by educating them in all that was worthy.

His vision for the colony brought him into close contact with some of its leading citizens who were, according to historian David McVilly, 'a group of cultural evangelists'. The most prominent were Redmond Barry and Hugh Culling Eardley Childers, and La Trobe had much in common with them.

In the interests of the universal education he espoused, La Trobe was a strong supporter of the concept of founding both a public library and a university which, as Geoffrey Blainey has written, 'would cultivate science and morality in the colony'. Barry and Childers were of similar views. Not only did all three consider that the newly separated colony of Victoria warranted a university just as much as did Sydney,

but the gold discoveries provided the wherewithal for the establishment of both the University and the Public Library, now the State Library of Victoria.

As wealth from gold multiplied, the establishment of a free public library in Victoria, fully supported by the State and open to all over the age of fourteen, *was made the subject of early consideration by our first Governor, Mr La Trobe. Fully impressed with the importance of the influence likely to arise from voluntary adult mental improvement, as well as of the intellectual and moral elevation to be created by a cultivation of the works by standard authors, he placed upon the Estimates of the year 1853 a sum of three thousand pounds...for the purchase of books, and ten thousand pounds...towards the erection of a suitable building to contain them.*

*(Supplemental Catalogue of the Melbourne Public Library, 1865, p. iii)*

The Appropriation Bill for both sums of money was given the Royal Assent on 20 January 1853. Barry was both first Chancellor of the University and first Chairman of Trustees of the Library. The foundation stones for both institutions were laid on the same day, 3 July 1854.

One of La Trobe's parting gestures to the Library in which he had such faith as a civilizing influence on the population, was a gift of 84 volumes from his own personal library. These books are still part of the State Library's collection today.

Thanks largely to the efforts of such visionaries as La Trobe and Barry, Melbourne was one of the first cities in the world to enjoy a state supported, truly free public library. Such a concept fitted so perfectly with La Trobe's Moravian principles of education, whether at a university or through the volumes contained in an excellent library.

La Trobe had arrived in Port Phillip with a certainty about his civilizing mission and the institutions through which it would be expressed. By 1854 when he left the colony, he could look back on an extraordinary catalogue of achievements.

Melbourne now had its first University and its free, universally accessible Public Library. The city was also equipped with the Melbourne Hospital, now the Royal Melbourne Hospital, the Mechanics' Institute, now the Melbourne Athenaeum, the Melbourne Philharmonic Society and the Philosophical Society, now the Royal Society of Victoria, all of which had been promoted by La Trobe. In fact, he was founding Patron of them all.

He had been directly influential in the establishment and development of Melbourne's Botanic Gardens as a place where the population could profitably spend their leisure in pursuit of moral and physical improvement. La Trobe had created vast expanses of rural land reserves and allotments of natural bush for the enjoyment of all while, nearer to Melbourne, the public reserves he established included the FitzRoy Gardens and Royal Park.

La Trobe's achievements were only grudgingly accepted by his contemporaries. His aspirations for the colony he had been sent to govern bore little relevance to those who lived in Port Phillip at that time. The new settlers were totally focused on

improvement in the material sense, while La Trobe had in mind the development of 'not only a Christian but a highly educated community well versed in the arts and sciences'. However, the flourishing State Library of Victoria today is evidence of his great vision for those who were to live in the Victoria of the future, and who would take full advantage of access to the information resources of the world.

La Trobe sailed for England in May 1854. He was created a Companion of the Order of the Bath in 1858 but, despite his achievements on behalf of the Crown, he was never again offered another Colonial Office posting.

With few exceptions, Victorians know very little about La Trobe. While a fine university bears his name, the Temple of the Winds in the Royal Botanic Gardens was erected in his honour, and one of Melbourne's principal thoroughfares is named for him, there was no public monument in his name until November 2006.

### ***Dianne Reilly***

Dr Dianne Reilly AM was the La Trobe Librarian at the State Library of Victoria, where she managed the Heritage Collections. She is Secretary of the C J La Trobe Society and has completed several works on Charles La Trobe. The latest "La Trobe: The Making of a Governor" published by Melbourne University Publishing, was launched on the 205th anniversary of La Trobe's birth on 20 March, 2006.

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